

Bell tries do-it-yourself phone service in Florida

'PhoneCenter' experiment in condominium complex reduces installation and other routine costs both for the customer and the telephone company

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SERVICE representative Diane Stella (right) helps a customer place an order at the PhoneCenter.

IN THESE DAYS of shortages and high cost of labor, telephone companies are seriously investigating various methods whereby certain functions which normally require a trip to the premises by an installer or a repairman may be handled by the customer.

Certain types of installations and changes in station equipment can be handled to reduce waiting time for the customer and allow savings to both the customer and the telephone company. In this connection, the Bell System has for some time been examining and evaluating the various methods to provide this type of service to its customers. The study indicates that a change should be considered in the present method of serving residential customers.

The old way and the new way

The Bell System has determined that, in many instances, the traditional method of plant employees' visits to fill almost every customer request—for new

service, moves, substitutions, repair of instruments, etc.—may not be the best way to serve the residential market. Furthermore, increased mobility of the American public is adding to the number of customer service requests. The Bell System, for example, installs about seven telephones for every one gained. When an installer with a truck makes a trip to a subscriber's residence, the cost to the company may be \$20 or more.

From the Bell System's viewpoint, a visit to fill practically every customer service order is a matter of serious consideration since the cost continues to escalate. Based on these considerations, the decision was made to test a "store" approach to marketing residential telephone service.

Under this plan, customers are offered an option. The company will provide service in the traditional manner—by a visit to the customer's home, and bill him the

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standard one-time charge—or he may visit the Customer Service Center, select plug-ending telephones in the colors and models desired, take them home and plug them in for “instant” service. In the latter case, the customer’s one-time charge is substantially reduced. This system enables a customer to obtain service by a mutually agreeable arrangement and at a time most convenient to him.

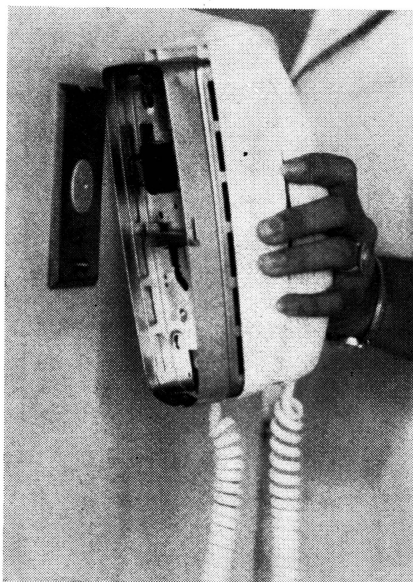
While the traditional method of providing service cannot be completely abandoned, many customers are finding it increasingly difficult to arrange appointments for visits of installers to their premises. Living patterns have changed. People are absent from homes more now than in the past. Nor does the customer understand why he is occasionally requested to wait for days to have service installed or to arrange for a simple task such as a substitution of one color or model telephone for another. Customers are generally made unhappy if, for some reason, an installer is late or is unable to keep an appointment. Even when a customer himself forgets or is not able to keep an appointment, he is often annoyed at having to repeat the entire procedure.

The PhoneCenter

The new Bell System’s concept will be tested on a limited basis in a few “ideal situation” locations. The first trial—the PhoneCenter in the Hollywood-

Hallandale area of Florida—involves about 2,300 customers in a complex of new high-rise buildings and condominiums which were pre-wired and equipped with jacks and faceplates during construction. This is a generally less expensive process than installation wiring for telephone service in existing buildings.

The telephone instruments offered in the PhoneCenter are the standard table and wall sets, the Princess phone, the Trimline table and wall phones, and volume control sets. In addition to testing a store approach to serving customers, the PhoneCenter features another “first”—plug-ended wall telephones. A special backplate has been designed, incorporating a plug and slip at-



PRE-INSTALLED faceplates make customer simplify installation of wall phones. Here, a customer mounts a wall Trimline set.

tachment that makes it easy for the customer to plug wall phones into a preinstalled faceplate.

How PhoneCenter works

The PhoneCenter is located in one of the trial buildings and is staffed by three service representatives and a plant employee. The representatives demonstrate the use of the equipment on display and instruct customers on how to plug in the various models.

After the customer selects the types of instrument and the cord lengths, a representative writes up the order and passes it to the plant employee. The kit plan is then used by the plant employee to fill the order while the customer waits which, in most cases, is only a few minutes. The selected color shells are placed on the sets, the requested cord lengths installed, number plates added and a special tag placed on each instrument. The tag shows a test number that the customer is requested to call after the set has been plugged in at his home. By calling this number, which is located in the PhoneCenter, the customer can verify that his line is in service and operating properly.

The plant employee places the telephones and directories in a specially designed PhoneCenter tote bag for the convenience of the customer. While the customer is on his way home, a call is placed to the central office with instructions to activate the line. By the time the customer plugs in the phone and dials the test number, his line is usually in service.

In addition to serving the new customer, as outlined above, the PhoneCenter also provides follow-up services. For example, a customer can go to the PhoneCenter if he desires to substitute one model or color of instrument for another. If trouble is exper-

ience with an instrument, the customer can take it to the PhoneCenter for repair or replacement. Other service problems are handled in the conventional manner by calling the repair service bureau.

General exchange tariff

The following is quoted from the General Exchange Tariff that is being used for the Florida PhoneCenter Trial: *The service connection charges will be 50 per cent of those normally applicable. For example, a customer in the Florida trial would pay \$5.50 instead of \$11 to establish service with a main station and two extensions. In addition, he would receive a credit of \$7 for returning the sets to the PhoneCenter when service is disconnected. Regular installation charges do not apply. A substitution charge of \$1.50 will apply for each telephone set exchanged for another set at the Customer Service Center for the purpose of changing style, color or type set, or length of cord (hand-set or mounting) except that this charge does not apply in connection with change to or from Touch-Tone Calling Service.*

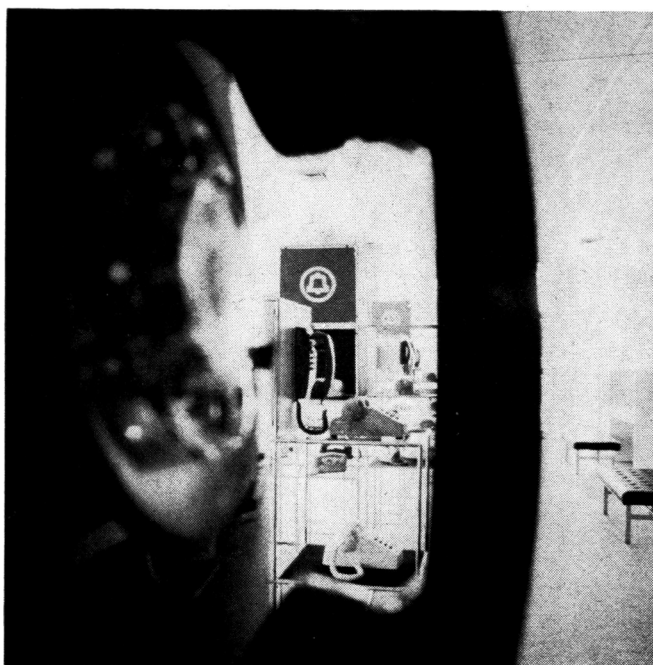
A set Return Credit, as shown below, will be made when service is reduced or disconnected and the customer returns the company's telephone instruments:

- a. Reduction of Service,
Each Set \$1.00
- b. Disconnection of Service,
First Set 5.00
Each additional set 1.00

More trials planned

Additional Bell System trials are planned, with the PhoneCenters located either in existing business offices or in space available in the vicinity of the trial areas. Detailed records will be maintained and surveys made of the trials to determine customer

INTERIOR of the PhoneCenter at Hallandale, Fla. offers comfort and convenience. A full range of telephone set styles is displayed.



acceptance, effect on customer and employee attitudes, customer preferences for particular models and colors of telephones and, of course, economic feasibility.

Several Independent telephone companies also are giving serious consideration to this new concept and soon may conduct trials in a few selected areas. Undoubtedly, large apartment house complexes are a fertile field for these trials.

Changing times

In the old days, almost everyone had his groceries delivered to his home. Because of the increasing costs for this service, the practice was gradually discontinued. People now prefer to go to supermarkets, select their groceries and make their own deliveries with the attendant savings in costs.

There also was a time, when bakers made daily deliveries in residential areas, but this practice has been discontinued for many years. Dairies, too, used to make daily deliveries, but this has now been reduced to two or three deliveries a week in many

areas; moreover, these dairy deliveries soon may be discontinued entirely because of the reduced number of customers currently served. Customers seem to prefer to purchase their dairy products at the supermarkets at reduced costs.

It is possible that the telephone industry is just coming into phase with the times by establishing PhoneCenters and arranging for their customers to deliver and plug in their station equipment so that both they and the company may realize a savings. □

Direct from Honolulu

See Oct. 31 issue of TELEPHONY for complete wrap up on convention speeches, committee reports and other happenings at the 73rd annual USITA convention in Honolulu.